

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

CHURCH OF ST. PETER, COBOURG,

ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 1879.

ON OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF THE

RIGHT REVEREND ALEXANDER NEIL,

LORD BISHOP OF TORONTO.

BY

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SERMON.

"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God, whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation."
—Hebrews xiii., 7.

If there be any time at which one, who has to speak on God's behalf, and for the edification of his people, should be especially careful to set a watch before the door of his lips, and to give utterance only to "words of truth and soberness," it is when he is called upon to speak of those who have been recently taken from us, and whom we regard with those feelings of affection and reverence, which are due to departed worth. The Christian teacher should, indeed, at all times propose to himself the lofty example of St. Paul, when he declares of himself, "but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ." But the time, to which I have referred, is a time when

it is more especially necessary that thought should be controlled and utterance restrained by the remembrance of the solemn obligation to speak "in Christ"—to speak as "in the sight of God"; and so to speak "out of all sincerity"—out of that honest fulness of the heart, which God Himself vouchsafes to the upright and sincere. May not also the very thought of the departed—the solemn recognition of their present state—warn us to observe this reverent sobriety of tone? They are gone from this dim spot, where truth and right are seen but through a clouded atmosphere, to a far purer, brighter, region, where in "the light of God" they "see light," as they could not see it upon earth. May we not, then, most profitably remember how they would now desire to be accounted of and spoken of, according to what they really were in the sight of God; how keenly sensible they would now be to the sinfulness of any deflection from the simple truth, how utterly revolting to them would be the voice of flattery?

And, again, how solemn a thing is it not to speak of the merits or demerits of the departed? Do not St. Paul's words ring in our ears, "Judge no man before the time until the Lord come"; "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self"?

We must, then, approach this duty with cautious, modest, steps, remembering the judgment seat of Him,

"who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the heart," and seeking, in His love and fear, to say nothing which shall then be put to shame.

I have spoken of approaching this *duty*, for a duty undoubtedly it is, to ponder in our hearts the memories of those who are gone, and to form, in all lowliness and self-distrust, an estimate of their character, whereby we may be instructed as to our own most sacred obligations, and stimulated to perform them.

This is the duty, brethren, which the sacred writer commends to us in the text, "Remember them that have the rule over you," or rather "your leaders," for he is evidently speaking of the dead, who had ruled, but were no longer ruling them, "such as spake unto you the word of God ; surveying the issue of whose conversation, imitate their faith." So, while we are warned *not* to judge, we yet may—we must—judge ; while we are forbidden to exercise a presumptuous arrogant judgment, as if we could read infallibly all the secrets of a brother's heart ; we may—we must—exercise a modest, sober judgment ; and, looking back upon a long course of action, of which the Providence of God has called us to witness the final issue, we may glorify God in our departed Christian friend or leader, even as the Churches of Judæa glorified God in St. Paul, when they had heard of the moral miracle of his conversion to the faith of Christ.

But to us, who are assembled here to-day, brethren, the exhortation of the text applies in all its strictness. "Remember him who was so long your leader in the Church of Christ, who spake unto you the word of God; and, contemplating the issue of his Christian conversation, imitate his faith." It is no brief course to which your gaze is directed, you look back on long years, bringing many changes and chances—many joys and sorrows; and through all those years you may trace a uniform Christian conversation; through all the varying hues of a life, not woven of one texture throughout, there runs unbroken *one* golden thread; and, as you trace it to the very end, you recognize its heavenly origin, and feel that you are summoned to imitate that faith, which gave the life which you contemplate this element of changelessness and constancy.

It is, brethren, a thought, alike solemn and consoling, that God has appointed that His servants shall glorify Him in death as well as in life. "None of us," says St. Paul, "liveth unto himself, and no man dieth to himself: for whether we live we live unto the Lord; and whether we die we die unto the Lord." The living, indeed, must come first: but when it has gone before, death does not abruptly end the service. The Christian *dies* to his Lord. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." *Precious*; no thing of chance, brought about arbitrarily or without design; it is something in God's hand, to be employed for gracious purposes; it has

its own proper work, such as prolonged life could not have effected. Do we not feel this in the instance of one, who, having served God with all the fresh, generous vigour of youth, is early called away? How blest and sacred is his memory: who shall weigh its value, as compared with that of longer years of service, which we fondly hoped might have been fulfilled? God knows best. God loves best, and chooses best. And so, in the case of those of riper years. Their death, also, is "to the Lord." It has its own proper work, which belongs not to the life. Hearts are softened towards those who are taken from us; we look back upon their past history through a more tender—a more chastening medium; the wondrous separation which death effects is not without its fruit; we learn to think more charitably, and so more justly, of our past relations to them, now broken off for ever; and words of kindly warning, or encouragement, or consolation—yes, even words of sorrowful reproof—return with new force to our memories, and seem to us as if they were spoken from another world. For they who spoke them are now in that other world, and our inmost heart assures us that they *now* know the profound importance of the truths which they once uttered, and that they would now repeat them with yet more solemn emphasis. "No man dieth unto himself." The very fact that the dead can plead with us no longer clothes their past pleadings with a tenfold power; those natural affections, which are so deeply rooted within us, unite to invest every sincere and loving admonition which they have

given, with a dignity and an authority which we failed to recognize before.

"Contemplating the issue of their conversation," says the text. The conversation or conduct of Christian men is marked by very different characteristics in different individuals ; and we may, I think, reverently believe that it has pleased Almighty God signally to illustrate, in different individuals, different Christian graces.

Those of you, to whom our late Bishop and your former Pastor had been known for many years, will well remember his domestic virtues, and the many and severe bereavements to which it pleased Almighty God to subject him. Some of these, and very sudden and painful ones, occurred before I knew him ; others have occurred since that time, and I feel that those who hear me will confess that they have seldom, if ever, witnessed more humble and absolute submission to the will of God than that which he discovered. No one who knew him could doubt how very keenly he felt these family afflictions : in the instance of the last I had occasion to know how very deeply he was pained by his separation from the dear son who was taken from him in a distant land ; and yet the sorrow, profound as it was, was governed by entire submission to the wisdom and goodness of God, and no impatient look, or word, or gesture, was permitted to disturb the resignation with which he meekly received the dispensation of his heavenly Father.

Brethren, I believe this to be the simple indubitable truth : a truth which, for our sakes, ought to be confessed, in order that we too may learn, should God thus visit us, to "imitate his faith."

Again, I would mention, as a distinctive excellence of our departed Bishop, his exemplary meekness under injury and insult. Others have been far more perturbed at witnessing what he suffered, than he himself was in suffering it. Some might say, speaking after the manner of men, that he was patient to excess ; but can we dare to say this, when we think of the example of Him, "Who, when He was reviled, reviled not again, when He suffered, He threatened not." ? He seems to have indeed taken to heart the saying of his Master, "The servant is not greater than his Lord." Was he insensible, then, to contumely, which he so passively endured ? No : his own keen sense of what was due to others, his own habitual observance of every rule of courtesy and kindness, forbids the possibility of such an hypothesis. And they, who knew him well, knew that he felt most deeply unworthy treatment which he yet forbore to resent. He is now forever beyond its reach ; and the opportunity of acknowledging the wrong, at least in this life, is also irrevocably withdrawn from those who were guilty of it.

May we not, then, brethren, most instructively contemplate this characteristic of our late leader's Christian conversation ; and, remembering how often

we ourselves have both inflicted and suffered injury by failing to exhibit a like patient endurance, may we not pray God to teach and strengthen us, in this respect also, to follow his faith? For faith it is—and faith alone—which can arm us to suffer thus; faith, which obediently accepts the humbling precepts of Christ, and lovingly endeavours to follow His matchless example.

And let us think, brethren, what a solemn import is, in every instance, given by the death of a fellow man, a fellow Christian, to our last words, spoken to him or of him. Words too often said lightly, very wantonly, uttered, yet invested with now terrible an importance by the fact that they are *the last*. He is gone, and our last mention of him was, perchance, contemptuous, unfeeling, unjust; our last word addressed to him was, perchance, a word of hatred or of scorn; our last glance such as no Christian man should ever dare to direct towards one for whom Christ died, how much less towards one who was our equal—perchance our superior—in the esteem, or by the express ordinance, of God. Oh! what a solemn character do not these last words acquire? How do we not wish that their significance could be cancelled, if not by their being sorrowfully withdrawn, at least by some later word, which might have abated somewhat from their evil meaning? Do we not long that a friendly greeting—a kindly glance, might have obliterated—or at least tempered, the remembrance of the unchristian bitterness which

we ventured to exhibit? No : it cannot be done, that is the *last* look, those are the *latest* words, with which God suffered us to encounter our brother in Christ ; we must be content now to be utterly ashamed of them in silent penitence here, withdrawing them before God, and entreating Him to blot them out of the book of His remembrance ; if we would not be utterly ashamed "before Christ at His coming," by reason of words most unworthy of His followers, and only the more utterly unworthy, if they professed to be spoken for His Name's sake.

In the high office which the departed filled for the last twelve years of his life, none can dispute his laborious discharge of duty, his patience, his mildness, his equitable dealing with all, whether he could, or could not reckon, in their instance, on a generous construction of his motives, and a loyal support of his official claims. I need not tell you, brethren, how, in these last years, not here alone, but in the mother country, the cares and responsibilities of the episcopal office have been increased ten-fold, by a miserable spirit of insubordination, unworthy of the Christian name, and unhappily, confined to no one section of the Church.

A Bishop of the Church at home, some twelve years since, used, in a charge, the following remarkable words : "There is, too, not a little in the bearing and spirit of those, who are under authority, much

calculated to bring the authority of our Church into contempt. I refer to the unchastened, undutiful, uncharitable, contumacious, unrestrained, unbelieving self-assertion, so prevalent in *all* parties in the Church. I use, my brethren, each of these many epithets with a definite meaning, and when I say *all* parties in the Church, I do so with the distressing conviction that the profession of principles of obedience is often not the expression of an obedient spirit."

This witness, unhappily, is no less true at the present day, than it was when it was uttered. These troubles, then, weighed very heavily on our departed Bishop, but none can truly say that they were ever aggravated by impatience, petulance, or arrogance on his part; we have, on the contrary, witnessed, with wonder and with deep sympathy, the calmness and self-controul, with which he encountered the peculiar trials of the time.

I think myself most happy, brethren, in being permitted to offer here a tribute to our late Bishop's memory. When I received the tidings of his death, and recognized the duty of referring to his loss in public, I could not but feel how great an advantage he would possess, who should be permitted to perform that office in this Church. In the College Chapel I should have spoken, for the most part, to those who knew the Bishop but slightly, if at all; and the same disadvantage would have been felt, though to a less

extent, in any church in Toronto ; but Cobourg was emphatically the Bishop's *home*, loved by him and cherished to the last. He was here known, as he could not be elsewhere, in those endearing relations, which spring up between a Christian pastor and his flock ; known, too, by happy and exemplary domestic traits, as the head of a Christian household ; blessed, in former years, with a gentle, faithful, and wise partner, whose memory, I am assured, is still enshrined in the hearts of many here present ; blessed, beyond man's ordinary lot, in the children who survive him, yet more blessed in those who had gone before, and between whom and himself death is, not a separation, but a re-union in gladness unspeakable.

"Contemplate," then, brethren, the happy "issue" of this his "conversation" in the family, and learn herein to "imitate his faith." Faith, be assured, a loving, obedient faith in God the Father, in God the Redeemer and Intercessor, in God the Sanctifier and Comforter, was the blessed source of the peace which dwelt within his home ; faith, elevating and purifying every enjoyment, and sustaining under every sorrow.

How many present must also remember your late pastor, as one who "spake unto you the word of God," not only in the public ministrations of the Church, in which he exercised his pastoral care over you collectively, but also in those private visitations, which often appeal more powerfully to the individual heart and

conscience, and leave a more indelible impression. How many must he not have here guided in perplexity, warned against affrighting or seductive temptations, comforted on the bed of sickness, consoled under the loss of friends.

“Contemplate,” then, brethren, in this regard also, the peaceful, consistent “issue” of his Christian “conversation.” The truths which he taught you are truths which he himself believed, by which his own life was governed. He has held that faith, in which he sought to build you up, steadfast unto the end. He *knows* now the truths which he so long *believed*. “Imitate,” then, his “faith”; and you, too, shall *know*, in God’s good time, that the sacred objects of your faith on earth are visible and imperishable realities elsewhere.

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